

SIF x WIF MBA Panel

November 20, 2020

Summary Notes

This panel was hosted in partnership with the SAF Student Investment Fund for the purpose of providing students with insights and exposure to the MBA path and experience. The featured panelists included Joanne Gutwinski (HBS), Vithushan Jeyakumaran (Stanford), Xinxin Zhang (LBS), and Dorena Tu (Wharton).

Joanne Gutwinski is an MBA candidate at Harvard Business School. She graduated from the Math/CPA program at the University of Waterloo in 2013 and graduated from the MAcc program in 2014. Prior to attending HBS, she was a private equity associate at Blackstone. Throughout her undergrad, Joanne did all of her co-ops in accounting at Deloitte. After graduation, she switched into investment banking at J.P. Morgan (New York) where she worked for three years. She then transitioned into private equity at Blackstone where she will be returning after the completion of her MBA.

Xinxin Zhang is an MBA candidate at London Business School. She graduated from the Math/CPA program at the University of Waterloo in 2012 and completed the MAcc program in 2013. Throughout her undergrad, she did all of her co-ops in audit at KPMG (Toronto) and after graduation, she worked in KPMG's M&A advisory group in New York for two years. Prior to attending LBS, she worked as an M&A associate at Constellation Software Inc. She then came back to Toronto and decided to pursue her MBA at LBS because she wanted a change before going back to her professional life.

Dorena Tu is an MBA graduate from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. She graduated from the AFM program at the University of Waterloo in 2012 and is currently working as an investment professional at Clairvest Group Inc. Throughout her undergrad, she did all of her co-ops in internal accounting and sales and trading. After graduation, she worked in investment banking at CIBC for a few years before deciding to take a break from financial advising and move to the U.S. for her MBA. She has been working in private equity at Clairvest ever since the completion of her MBA.

Vithushan Jeyakumaran is an MBA graduate from the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He graduated from the Math/CPA program at the University of Waterloo in 2014 and is currently working as a deployment lead at Afresh. Throughout his undergrad, Vithushan started his career at Deloitte in accounting before transitioning to consulting. Post graduation, he worked at Boston Consulting Group as a management consultant for the next few years before he decided to pursue his MBA at Stanford. He has been working at Afresh in San Francisco ever since the completion of his MBA.

Q: How did you prepare for MBA admission?

A: Start by doing research to really narrow down which school is best suited for your personality and interests. Be sure to connect with people who have went there to learn more about the application process, culture, and ideal candidate for that school. Aim for a high score on your GMAT, build your resume with impactful work and accomplishments that you are passionate about, get feedback on your essay and short answer questions before submitting, and do mock interviews with people who have gone through the process before. The application process and criteria are different for each school, so do your best to gain as much insight and advice as possible before applying.

Q: How is (was) the MBA experience?

A: Your experience in business school is very much what you make of it—go in with a clear vision of your goals and an understanding of why you are attending. Regardless of whichever school you choose, the experience you gain is invaluable as there are a lot of opportunities to build meaningful connections and relationships with your peers. Waterloo and business schools are essentially the same in terms of technical skills, but the social aspect and soft skills are what business schools are known for. You are talking to people from all over the world and in different professions so you learn how to communicate better and expand your network. Construct the experience that you want and be very intentional with who you want to make friends with. Business schools can teach you how to open up in a way that is still professional. You learn about your leadership philosophy and how you want to treat people. Because cohorts are so international, discussing cases in class while learning about first-hand experience and diverse perspectives on current topics is very interesting. The social aspect is by far one of the most important, as the primary focus of business school is to expand your network. You will be able to meet people who are experts in their respective fields and grow your network across different industries and geographies.

Q: What kinds of skills do you gain while pursuing an MBA that you would not otherwise gain by working full-time or being in a business undergrad program?

A: MBA programs have a much larger focus on soft skills than anything else. Technical skills are briefly touched upon, but the main goal is to develop your leadership and communication style to help you become a more well-rounded individual. They really try to develop that social aspect in people and help you build stronger relationships with those around you. By the time you graduate from business school, you have a very diverse and international network of professionals in different areas to leverage. Learning to communicate professionally while discussing personal matters is one of the key skills you develop. The opportunity to build these connections is invaluable and you rarely find yourself in such a unique position to do so at a personal level outside of business school.

Q: How did you go about picking your MBA school?

A: It comes down to the philosophy of the school that you like, where you want to live, and the people you want to meet. You do not pick a business school based on your career path. It is important to do your research before applying. Different schools are known for different things, so it is important to understand what you are looking for. Some schools have more electives than others and each school has its own primary focus for curriculum and course content. Informally, Harvard is known to help you become a better manager whereas Stanford is known to help you become a better person—this goes to show that knowing your goals also plays a crucial role in selecting your business school. Panelists' choices for business schools were based off their experiences in the application process, attending open houses, and on how strongly the school's values aligned with their own.

Q: Did you work with any admissions consulting agencies? If so, how useful did you find this?

A: Working with an admissions consultant is very useful because they are able to provide firsthand insight and advice on the application process. They give you the criteria these schools are looking for in candidates, and help you tailor your application to best highlight your skills, personality, and experiences. They can also help you with mock interviews and developing the strongest answers for certain types of questions. You do not necessarily need to hire someone since people are willing to help you if you reach out about 90% of the time, so do not shy away from trying to connect with someone who could be a potential resource for you. Hiring an admissions consultant helps give your application an edge, which is useful considering the large number of applications these schools receive every year.

Q: How has COVID affected your MBA experience?

A: Classes are still happening in person in the U.S. and social distancing has been implemented. You can choose whether you would like to attend class in person or online since both options are available. There have been a few outbreaks of COVID, but the experience itself has not been significantly impacted. Safety measures have been put into place (wearing masks, leaving space between seats in classrooms, etc.) and as a result, classes and learning can resume normally for the most part.

Q: In your opinion, what makes a competitive MBA candidate for your school? What advice do you have for students who plan to apply to an MBA program?

A: You need to get personal in your application. It is not about your accomplishments as much as your characteristics, and you need to make sure you are emphasizing each characteristic at least twice in your application. These schools receive thousands of applications each year, so it is crucial to have a strong essay that is very introspective. Write about what draws you to your career, who you are, why you are the way you are, your aspirations, and put all these ideas into a story that you can tell to the school. All of these ideas are communicated through your essay to help the school understand your personality, ambitions, and goals. You need to be authentic.

Do not think about building your resume, start to do things you are really passionate about because that will make you stand out. Aim to have a top GMAT score and focus on gaining more international experience and exposure to different cultures—work that into your essay and short answer questions. On your resume, try to highlight how you make an impact at work and some major accomplishments you have achieved. The interview is very personal and more therapy style than professional, and authenticity plays a big role. You need to understand the kind of candidate your school of choice is looking for. Pick a school that you really like, find someone who went there, and talk to them to learn more about the application process. To those students who are still in school, you have years to shape the person you want to be. Take your time to really discover who you are and your passions.

Q: Is the return on investment for an MBA worth the cost?

A: You can't quantify ROI for an MBA. If you want to approach it from a financial metric perspective, the MBA is probably not the right choice for you. However, if you value experience more than money, then the MBA is for you.